

“Just As He Said”

Acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday ~ March 31, 2024

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We come this morning proclaiming, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!” So where is Jesus in this gospel reading? Where is the brass? The timpani? Or at least one small appearance as we have in the other gospels? Why do we have this text which ends only with an empty tomb and frightened wondering women? You might see the so called Shorter Ending and Longer Ending in your Bibles, clearly future generations also found this original ending to be inadequate. But verse 8 is where the original author ended the gospel, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Even as this ending feels anti-climactic, with its empty tomb and lack of Jesus, I wonder if it also feels most true to life. Even though Jesus predicted his resurrection, more than once, the women come with burial spices in hand, ready to prepare his already decomposing body for proper burial. They don't come wondering “What will we find?” but rather “How will we roll away the stone?” Someone being raised from the dead isn't in their worldview nor in the worldview of any among Jesus' closest circle for the disciples are not here either.

When they find the stone rolled away, the tomb emptied, and a man in white sitting there with a message for them, how could they help but be terrified? How could they help but wonder what it all means? A new possibility is placed before them, a seed of hope planted within them, and it seems very human to me and to my experience that great possibility and hope often come accompanied by terror and amazement. Fear co-mingled with wonder.

Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus' promises are received just that way. Casting out demons, Jesus promises that he has come to destroy all power that oppresses or abuses or violates another human being or any part of God's creation. And all who witness respond with fear and amazement.

Crossing the sea with his disciples, Jesus stills a storm promising that God's power will be used on behalf of and with love for God's good creation – including us! And the disciples respond with fear and amazement.

Teaching about the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God, he says, “the first will be last and the last will be first” promising that the poor and vulnerable will be lifted up and held in great esteem. “And all are amazed and those who followed were afraid (Mk 10:32).” People who follow Jesus all

through Mark's gospel are very often afraid and amazed, questioning all the time if they can trust the incredible possibility inherent in Jesus' presence.

This feels true to life to me. Think of experiences we have in life that are filled with great possibility. Going off to college or starting one's first job, beginning a new relationship whether it be marriage or friendship, raising a child. All these life experiences come with great possibility, fear and amazement come too.

Sometimes our life experiences begin only in fear. Often when we are plunged into the unknown, it takes time and patience to see the inherent possibility and longer to trust it. Losing a job, the end of a relationship, suffering an illness, the death of a loved one. And while many of you have experienced the life that comes through death and darkness, it was an act of faith to trust that it would be so.

In the women facing the empty tomb, fear comes first, but the man in white has a message of good news containing great possibility and a promise. "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Suddenly in the empty tomb is the possibility of a new beginning for the disciples and even for Peter who has denied Jesus. There's the possibility of forgiveness and of being reunited with one whom they love. They're to go back to Galilee where it all began. What seemed like an ending is a new beginning, and with God, every ending is a new beginning. It's true at the end of life and true during life as well. Even as it may take time to see the possibility in an ending and time for new beginning to unfold, but it comes.

Suddenly in the empty tomb is the promise that the risen Christ goes before them. "He is going ahead of you," the man in white promises. "If that is true, then death is stripped of its power. There is nothing Jesus' followers will endure, no place they can go, that Jesus isn't already there."ⁱ

Suddenly in the empty tomb is the promise that they will see Jesus. Just as he was in life, he will be among those who seek the wholeness and shalom of God's kin-dom. He will be in every humble act of compassion, mercy, and justice.

Though fleeing in terror and amazement and lacking understanding, we know the women risked beginning again. We know they trusted Christ's presence gone before them. We know that they and the disciples continued his ministry with all who seek life in Christ. We know they saw Jesus and they witnessed to the good news. We know this because we are here. We've heard the good news passed on down from them through generations of people, a direct line of witnesses to the risen Christ which includes us.

As I wrote this sermon, I could not help but think about the many places in the world suffering from extreme violence, all the lives shattered by war, poverty, and injustice. Communities and nations upended by the greed of leaders and by our complicity. What about those who face death today? Where is the possibility for them? Easter hope must include the acknowledgement that for some the promise of a new beginning will not be fulfilled in this mortal plane, but in the next. Our mortal bodies

are subject to the decay that comes with this life, but in the empty tomb is the promise that Christ has conquered death and that he goes ahead of us through death to life eternal, the first fruit of what God intends for all people. This is not to absolve us of the responsibility to pray and work for peace, wholeness, and justice for all people in this life, but to remind us that the promises we're given in the risen Christ are not for this life only but also for eternal life. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" writes Paul.

The coming year will bring its own challenges for the world, our country, this church, but Jesus goes before us. Jesus with all his power. Jesus with all his love. Jesus, risen from the grave, bringing new life to all. Our lives have been opened anew by all the possibility inherent in that empty tomb and in the power of God who conquered sin and death forever. Because of Easter morning, our lives will never be the same again.

An Easter Poem – I cannot resist sharing this poem written by Jan Richardson (“© Jan Richardson. janrichardson.com.”) with you. In a different way, it expresses what I have sought to say to you on this Easter Day.

Seen ~ *A Blessing for Easter Day*

You had not imagined that something so empty
could fill you to overflowing,

and now you carry the knowledge like an awful treasure
or like a child that roots itself beneath your heart:

how the emptiness will bear forth a new world
that you cannot fathom but on whose edge you stand.

So why do you linger?
You have seen, and so you are already blessed.
You have been seen, and so you are the blessing.

There is no other word you need.
There is simply to go and tell.
There is simply to begin. —Jan Richardson

ⁱ <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=85>